

VZCZCXRO3008  
RR RUEHCHI RUEHCN RUEHDT RUEHHM RUEHLN RUEHMA RUEHPB RUEHPOD  
DE RUEHHI #0046/01 0160106  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 160106Z JAN 08  
FM AMEMBASSY HANOI  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6999  
INFO RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH 4150  
RUEHZN/ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM COLLECTIVE  
RUEHZN/ENVIRONMENT SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COLLECTIVE  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 7010  
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 0751  
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA 0511  
RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC  
RUEAUSA/DEPT OF HHS WASHINGTON DC  
RUEHC/DEPT OF INTERIOR WASHINGTON DC  
RUEAWJA/DEPT OF JUSTICE WASHINGTON DC  
RUEHC/DEPT OF LABOR WASHINGTON DC  
RHMFIUU/HQ EPA WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 HANOI 000046

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

BANGKOK FOR REO WALLER AND RDM/A (OCARDUNER/CBOWES)  
CDC ATLANTA FOR COGH (SBLOUNT/KMCCALL) and NIOSH  
(JHOWARD/GWAGNER/MSWEENEY)  
COMMERCE FOR 4430/MAC/AP/OPB/HPPHO  
HHS/OSSI/DSI PASS TO OGHA (WSTIEGER/LVALDEZ/CHICKEY) AND  
FIC/NIH (RGLASS)

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [SENV](#) [TBIO](#) [ECON](#) [SOCI](#) [VM](#)

SUBJECT: ECONOMIC GROWTH TRUMPS PUBLIC HEALTH: VIETNAMESE ROOFING  
TILE WORKERS EXPOSED TO ASBESTOS

REF: 07 Ho Chi Minh City 1276

HANOI 00000046 001.2 OF 004

1. (U) Summary. Vietnam increasingly relies on asbestos in its construction sector, despite the internationally recognized harmful health impacts from asbestos exposure. In the absence of effective worker safety provisions, many workers in Vietnam's growing number of asbestos-cement processing facilities will suffer debilitating diseases from handling asbestos over the ensuing decades. End Summary.

Vietnam Construction Sector Relies on Asbestos...

2. (U) To support the rapid development of its construction sector, Vietnam has increasingly turned to asbestos for low-cost, durable roofing material and now has one of the world's highest per capita consumption rates. Vietnam does not produce asbestos, instead relying on imports of the raw material to meet domestic demand. In 2005 (the last year for which complete statistics are available), Vietnam imported over 74,000 tons, largely from Russia, China, and Canada. The GVN has officially licensed 35 factories to produce asbestos-cement roofing tiles, though labor protection authorities believe at least fifteen other non-permitted factories have recently opened to take advantage of the growing market for the product and simple manufacturing technology. In 2005, permit-holding facilities produced over 66 million square meters of asbestos-cement materials, almost all for domestic consumption, at a value of over USD 40 million.

3. (SBU) Asbestos-cement producers directly employ over ten thousand workers and provide indirect employment to many thousands more. According to Dr. Pham Van Hai of the National Institute of Labor Protection (NILP), cheap, durable asbestos-cement roofing tiles ease the development of rural areas and coastal zones that face heavy storms, high heat and other harsh environmental conditions. Dr. Nguyen Ba Toai of Hanoi University of Civil Engineering, told

Embassy Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Officer that asbestos-cement roof materials reduce housing costs and play an important role in GVN poverty reduction programs, under which the GVN often provides asbestos-cement roofing tiles free of charge to replace fire-prone native roofing materials.

#### ...Leading to Severe Health Effects

-----

¶4. (U) International health experts list asbestos as a carcinogen in humans and state that it may cause severe impacts to exposed Vietnamese workers, including lung cancer, malignant mesothelioma, asbestosis, and other serious diseases. Since the Vietnamese asbestos-cement roofing sector developed in the mid-1990s and diseases from asbestos exposure often exhibit a latency period of twenty or more years, there would be little specific impact on Vietnamese workers currently. Indeed, Vietnam has few reported cases of asbestos-related diseases, with only four "official" confirmed cases of asbestosis and no cases of mesothelioma or lung cancer among asbestos-cement roofing tile workers. However, in addition to the lag time between exposure and disease, the lack of capacity for occupational disease checks, the lack of a national disease surveillance program, and low cooperation from asbestos-cement manufacturers probably leads to substantial under-reporting.

¶5. (U) A 2006 National Profile on Occupational Safety and Health in Vietnam (NPOSH) report noted that occupational disease cases generally are likely to be at least eight times higher than reported and recent medical examinations of workers in several asbestos-cement plants found that 88 percent reported health problems ranging from breathing difficulties to chronic nasal inflammation. Furthermore, smoking substantially aggravates the impacts of asbestos exposure. As about 55 percent of Vietnamese males over the age of 15 years smoke, the combined health effects of smoking and asbestos-exposure over time probably will be severe. (Note: At some

HANOI 00000046 002.2 OF 004

point, Vietnamese consumers also will suffer health effects due to asbestos exposure as current asbestos-containing materials deteriorate, are repaired or are recycled).

#### Poor Health Controls at Production Facilities

-----

¶6. (U) Vietnamese asbestos-cement roofing tile factories lack adequate engineering controls or ventilation systems and become contaminated with asbestos dust, leading to worker exposures far above Vietnamese or international standards. World Health Organization experts who have visited numerous asbestos using factories note poor worker protection with no personal protective devices or masks and NILP surveys have found workers handling asbestos with bare hands. Few workers or managers know of asbestos-related health risks or means to limit them. Even at permitted facilities, processing equipment and broken storage bags leak asbestos into the air. Warning labels often are in Russian or English -- unintelligible to most workers and supervisors.

#### Past GVN Attempts to Ban/Control Asbestos Have Failed

-----

¶7. (U) As early as 2001, the GVN moved to limit asbestos, as part of a Prime Ministerial Decision (115/2001/QD-TTG) to develop a master plan for the construction industry through 2010 that would have modified legislation to require the roofing industry to use alternative materials, control the number of existing asbestos-roofing factories, forbid the construction of new asbestos roofing factories, and finally eliminate asbestos in the production of roofing tile by 2004. The Decision also addressed environmental air control, air monitoring, health examinations of asbestos workers, personal protective equipment, training on occupational safety and health, and inspections.

¶8. (U) However, the GVN never fully enforced this Decision, instead revising it through a subsequent Decision (133/2004/QD-TTG), issued on July 20, 2004, which banned the use of amosite and amphibole

asbestos in production of roofing tile and required existing roofing tile facilities to obey all health and environmental protection requirements. Again, enforcement was weak. On September 6, 2006, the Ministry of Construction issued a decision to ban importation of amphibole asbestos but continued to allow the import of chrysotile asbestos. However, these measures contain more bark than bite. Amphibole asbestos makes up less than one percent of current world production (Note: chrysotile or "white asbestos," which Vietnamese legislation does not ban and which international health experts also believe to be dangerous enough to justify a ban, makes up 99 percent of world production).

#### Initial Steps to Find Substitutes, Mitigate Impacts

-----

¶9. (U) At this time, the GVN has begun to investigate the use of asbestos substitutes, such as polyvinyl alcohol (PVA) cellulose cement materials, although commercial production might be several years away. Several issues stand in the way: substitute products are perceived by the Vietnamese to be more expensive and less durable; and hence may explain why there are only two companies in Vietnam currently that manufacture with substitutes. The GVN also has taken initial steps to mitigate the health impacts of asbestos, including listing asbestosis as a recognized occupational disease, entitling affected workers to compensation. The Ministries of Health, Labor, War Invalids, and Social Affairs, and Construction, along with labor unions have been tasked with increasing supervision of the asbestos sector to ensure compliance with occupational safety and health regulations. Similarly, Vietnamese law requires all asbestos factories to organize worker safety training courses for all employees and include environmental control systems as part of modernization plans.

#### Lack of Capacity Hinders Efforts

HANOI 00000046 003.2 OF 004

-----

¶10. (SBU) However, as with many worker safety issues (reftel) Vietnamese attempts to limit the health effects of asbestos seem doomed to fail due to lack of manufacturing and technical capacity, weak political will, and limited funding and investment. Additionally, and despite declarations from international health experts to the contrary, some Vietnamese public health experts believe that chrysotile asbestos is less harmful than the already-banned amosite asbestos and have been hesitant to support restrictions on this affordable and useful substance. Existing safety and health standards are inadequate to protect worker health and few companies follow even these minimal standards. GVN authorities rarely inspect asbestos production facilities. NILP, part of Vietnam General Confederation Labor (VGCL) and the most senior institution representing workers' rights in Vietnam, must receive permission from asbestos-cement roofing tiles prior to conducting site visits. Unlike many developed nations, Vietnam has no national disease surveillance program to monitor and track asbestos workers -- critical as most asbestos-related diseases do not develop for ten to forty years after exposure -- though the WHO plans to fund the Ministry of Health to develop such a program in ¶2008. Vietnam also has no standards for health exams for these workers, who rarely receive medical checks. Those that do display work-related illnesses typically are moved to other areas in the factories.

#### As Does Fear of Economic Impacts

-----

¶11. (SBU) GVN officials fear that a ban or significant restriction on asbestos could cost thousands of jobs as the country attempts to move to alternate production and would send many poorly educated and low-skilled workers looking for employment, while removing a low-cost source of construction materials. Though there is some debate on this point, many Vietnamese involved with the issue believe that conversion to cost-effective substitutes for asbestos-cement roofing materials is not feasible in the short term. We could not determine if any external marketing pressure by asbestos suppliers is being applied in Vietnam, as has been reported

in other countries. Vietnamese decision makers also tend to discount the economic impacts of asbestos exposure, since serious future health costs will not accrue for many years. In the face of more immediate economic considerations, many GVN officials are loathe to take the issue on publicly, instead hoping to quietly move for better protections and seeking voluntary cooperation from businesses, instead of popularizing the issue.

Comment

-----

¶9. (SBU) As Vietnam continues to expand economically, its policy-makers will need to address the public health and environmental impacts of such rapid growth. To date, the GVN claims promoting better health is a national priority, but typically sacrifices physical well-being if it compromises production. The asbestos-cement roofing sector is a case in point and illustrates an insufficient approach to both health policy development and integration with economic policy. The GVN realizes that prolonged exposure to asbestos will cause workers to suffer a variety of diseases. However, those impacts probably are years down the road. The need for economic growth, on the other hand, is current and ever-present. In such cases, short-term economic concerns trump long-term public welfare needs.

MICHALAK

6

HANOI 00000046 004.2 OF 004

1